CHAPTER FOUR

SHIFTING TENSES IN THE APOCALYPSE

Introduction

One of the conspicuous features of the Apocalypse is the manner in which the author shifts back and forth between all the major Greek tense forms in the indicative mood in the visionary (and auditory) segments, a shift which Bousset characterized as “das regellose Schwanken.”¹ Revelation’s visionary material exhibits these tense shifts while usually referring to the same temporal sphere, normally a narrative account of what John saw. This shifting of tense forms would appear to present a problem for strictly temporal approaches to the Greek verbal system. Consequently, scholars have attempted to account for this phenomenon. Lancellotti thought that the shifting of tenses revealed confusion on the part of the author based on the underlying Hebrew tense system. Mussies, however, contends that the shifting tenses in Revelation must be understood temporally from the standpoint of John’s visionary experience. According to Mussies in many cases the tenses reveal distinct groupings, where there is a group of past tenses (aorist) followed by a group of present tenses followed by a group of futures.² This accounts for the following three perspectives corresponding to the groupings of tense forms:

a) the past time when the visions were actually seen, or are pretended to have been seen (aorist);

b) the life pictures of events and situations (present);

c) the prophetic character of the visions (future).³

Thus Mussies does give the varying tense forms in Revelation’s visions their full temporal values.

¹ Bousset, Offenbarung, 168.
² Mussies, Morphology, 340.
³ Mussies, Morphology, 340.
However, Mussies’ treatment of this issue suffers from overdependence on a temporal orientation toward the Greek tense forms. As seen above, along with the rest of the New Testament, John’s Greek grammaticalizes verbal aspect in the formal tense endings. Moreover, while some visions often exhibit a grouping of tense forms, the tenses commonly appear distributed throughout the visions, rendering much of Mussies’ proposal tenuous and of limited value. For example, though not strictly a vision (see below) in 11.1–13 aorist tense forms begin (ἐδόθη) and end (εἰσῆλθεν, ἔστησαν, ἔπεσεν, ἤκομαν, Ἀνέβησαν, Ἐθεώρησαν, Ἐγένετο, ἔπεσεν, Ἀπεκτάνθησαν, Ἐγένετο) the narrative, and carry the main story line throughout. The present tense also occurs distributed throughout this segment (v. 5, θέλει, ἔπαιρε; v. 6, ἔχουσιν; v. 8, καλεῖτα; v. 10, χαίρουσιν, εὐφωνίζονται), as does the future (v. 2, παῖσάντες; v. 3, προφητεύουσιν; v. 7, ποιεῖ, νικᾶ, ἀποκτενεῖ; v. 10, πέμψουσιν). Likewise, in Ch. 13 the aorist tense predominates throughout, and present tenses (v. 4, δύναται; v. 10, ἔστιν, ἔστι); two imperfect forms (v. 11, ἐχεῖ, ἐλάλει) one perfect (v. 8, γέγραπται), and future tense forms are scattered throughout the vision (v. 8, προσκυνήσουσιν; v. 12, προσκυνήσουσιν). In view of the fact that the tenses shift back and forth throughout the vision, one wonders how likely it was that the readers were meant to shift temporal spheres back and forth so rapidly while hearing/reading the visionary narratives.

The more predominant approach to the issue is to find Semitic influence of some kind behind John’s seemingly odd (non-temporal) use of tense forms. One of the most recent, thorough treatments from this perspective is that of Thompson, who postulates a Semitic pattern for the tense shifts found in Revelation’s visions. Thompson notes the “sudden and seemingly inexplicable shifts among aorist/present/future tenses of verbs in connected narrative, without a corresponding shift in the time during which the action being described actually takes place.” While he admits that this phenomenon of shifting tenses can be found elsewhere

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4 Lancellotti, Charles. While Mussies sees Semitic influence behind John’s use of verb tenses (from Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew), he nevertheless does not find the Greek tenses used in an un-Greek manner (Morphology), though he invests them with their “normal” temporal values.

5 Thompson, Semitic Syntax.

6 Thompson, Semitic Syntax, 47. Thompson states that his starting point for examining shifting tenses is his previous argument that Semitic influence must account for the irregular usage of aorist, present, and future tenses. I would also include the perfect tense form, though it occurs much less frequently in Revelation.